

Aulus Persius Flaccus

by Henry D. Thoreau

An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth; but Love says, resist not evil; love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you. But the law is a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, who is the end of the law. It is therefore of great importance that we understand this law, and to this end we commend the work of Jouffroy that we have been reviewing as one of the best helps that can be found.

W.

IF you have imagined what a divine work is spread out for the poet, and approach this author too, in the hope of finding the field at length fairly entered on, you will hardly dissent from the words of the prologue,

"Ipse semipaganus Ad sacra Vatum carmen affero nostrum ."

Here is none of the interior dignity of Virgil, nor the elegance and fire of Horace, nor will any Sibyl be needed to remind you, that from those older Greek poets, there is a sad descent to Persius . Scarcely can you distinguish one harmonious sound, amid this unmusical bickering with the follies of men.

One sees how music has its place in thought, but hardly as yet in language. When the Muse arrives, we wait for her to remould language, and impart to it her own rhythm. Hitherto the verse groans and labors with its load, but goes not forward blithely, singing by the way. The best ode may be parodied, indeed is itself a parody, and has a poor and trivial sound, like a man stepping on the rounds of a ladder. Homer, and Shakspeare, and Milton, and Marvel, and Wordsworth, are but the rustling of leaves and crackling of twigs in the forest, and not yet the sound of any bird. The Muse has never lifted up her voice to sing. Most of all satire will not be sung. A Juvenal or Persius do not marry music to their verse, but are measured faultfinders at best ; stand but just outside

the faults they condemn, and so are concerned rather about the monster they have escaped, than the fair prospect before them. Let them live on an age, not a secular one, and they will have travelled out of his shadow and harm's way, and found other objects to ponder. As long as there is nature, the poet is, as it were, Itarticeps crimints . One sees not but he had best let bad take care of itself, and have to do only with what is beyond suspicion . If you light on the least vestige of truth, and it is the weight of the whole body still which stamps the faintest trace, an eternity will not suffice to extol it, while no evil is so huge, but you grudge to bestow on it a moment of hate. Truth never turns to rebuke falsehood; her own straightforwardness is the severest correction. Horace would not have written satire so well, if he had not been inspired by it, as by a passion, and fondly cherished his vein. In his odes, the love always exceeds the hate, so that the severest satire still sings itself, and the poet is satisfied, though the folly be not corrected . A sort of necessary order in the development of Genius is, first, Complaint ; second, Plaint ; third, Love. Complaint, which is the condition of Persius, lies not in the province of poetry. Ere long the enjoyment of a superior good would have changed his disgust into regret.

We can never have much sympathy with the complainer ; for after searching nature through, we conclude he must be both plaintiff and defendant too, and so had best come to a settlement without a hearing. I know not but it would be truer to say, that the highest strain of the muse is essentially plaintive. The saint's are still tears of joy. But the divinest poem, or the life of a great man, is the severest satire ; as impersonal as nature herself, and like the sighs of her winds in the woods, which convey ever a slight reproof to the hearer. The greater the genius, the keener the edge of the satire. Hence have we to do only with the rare and fragmentary traits, which least belong to Persius, or, rather, are the properest utterance of his muse ; since that which he says best at any time is what he can best say at all times. The Spectators and Ramblers have not failed to cull some quotable sentences from this garden too, so pleasant is it to meet even the most familiar truths in a new dress, when, if our neighbor had said it, we should have passed it by as hackneyed. Out of these six satires, you may perhaps select some twenty lines, which fit so well as many thoughts, that they will recur to the scholar almost as readily as a natural image; though when translated into familiar language, they lose that insular emphasis, which fitted them for quotation. Such lines as the following no translation can render commonplace. Contrasting the man of true religion with those, that, with jealous privacy, would fain carry on a secret commerce with the gods, he says,-

"Hand cuivis promptum est, murmurque humilesque
Tollere susurros de templis ; et aperto vivere voto."

To the virtuous man, the universe is the only sanctum sanctorum, and the penetralia of the temple are the broad noon of his existence. Why should he betake himself to a subterranean crypt, as if it were the only holy ground in all the world he had left unprofaned? The obedient soul would only the more discover and familiarize things, and escape more and more into light and air, as having henceforth done with secrecy, so that the universe shall not seem open enough for it. At length, is it neglectful even of that silence which is consistent with true modesty, but by its independence of all confidence in its disclosures, makes that which it imparts so private to the hearer, that it becomes the care of the whole world that modesty be not infringed. To the man who cherishes a secret in his breast, there is a still greater secret unexplored. Our most indifferent acts may be matter for secrecy, but whatever we do with the utmost truthfulness and integrity, by virtue of its pureness, must be transparent as light. In the third satire he asks,

"Est aliquid quo tendis, et in quod dirigis arcum An passim sequeris corvos, testave, lutove, Securus quo per ferat, atque ex tempore vivis?"

Language seems to have justice done it, but is obviously cramped and narrowed in its significance, when any meanness is described. The truest construction is not put upon it. What may readily be fashioned into a rule of wisdom, is here thrown in the teeth of the sluggard, and constitutes the front of his offence. Universally, the innocent man will come forth from the sharpest inquisition and lecturings, the combined din of reproof and commendation, with a faint sound of eulogy in his ears. Our vices lie ever in the direction of our virtues, and in their best estate are but plausible imitations of the latter.

Falsehood never attains to the dignity of entire falseness, but is only an inferior sort of truth; if it were more thoroughly false, it would incur danger of becoming true.

"Securus quo pes ferat, atque ex tempore vivit,

is then the motto of a wise man. For first, as the subtle discernment of the language would have taught us, with all his negligence he is still secure; but the sluggard, notwithstanding his heedlessness, is insecure. The life of a wise man is most of all extemporaneous, for he lives out of an eternity that includes all time. He is a child each moment and reflects wisdom. The far darting thought of the child's mind tarries not for the development of manhood ; it lightens itself, and needs not draw down lightning from the clouds. When we bask in a single ray from the mind of Zoroaster, we see how all

subsequent time has been an idler, and has no apology for itself. But the cunning mind travels farther back than Zoroaster each instant, and comes quite down to the present with its revelation . All the thrift and industry of thinking give no man any stock in life ; his credit with the inner world is no better, his capital no larger. He must try his fortune again today as yesterday. All questions rely on the present for their solution. Time measures nothing but itself: The word that is written may be postponed, but not that on the life. If this is what the occasion says, let the occasion say it. From a real sympathy, all the world is forward to prompt him who gets up to live without his creed in his pocket. In the fifth satire, which is the best, I find,

"Stat contra ratio, et recretam garrir in aurem.
Ne liceat facere id, quod quis vitiabit agendo."

Only they who do not see how anything might be better done are forward to try their hand on it . Even the master workman must be encouraged by the reflection, that his awkwardness will be incompetent to do that harm, to which his skill may fail to do justice. Here is no apology for neglecting to do many things from a sense of our incapacity, -for what deed does not fall maimed and imperfect from our hands?-but only a warning to bungle less. The satires of Persius are the farthest possible from inspired; evidently a chosen, not imposed subject. Perhaps I have given him credit for more earnestness than is apparent; but certain it is, that that which alone we can call Persius, which is forever independent and consistent, was in earnest, and so sanctions the sober consideration of all. The artist and his work are not to be separated. The most wilfully foolish man cannot stand aloof from his folly, but the deed and the doer together make ever one sober fact . The buffoon may not bribe you to laugh always at his grimaces; they shall sculpture themselves in Egyptian granite, to stand heavy as the pyramids on the ground of his character.

T.

THE SHIELD

THE old man said, " Take thou this shield, my son,
Long tried in battle, and long tried by age,
Guarded by this thy fathers did engage,
Trusting to this the victory they have won."

Forth from the tower Hope and Desire had built,
In youth's bright morn I gazed upon the plain,-

There struggled countless hosts, while many a stain
Marked where the blood of brave men had been spilt.

With spirit strong I buckled to the fight,
What sudden chill rushes through every vein?
Those fatal arms oppress me-all in vain
My fainting limbs seek their accustomed might.

Forged were those arms for men of other mould,
Our hands they fetter, cramp our spirits free,
I throw them on the ground and suddenly
Comes back my strength-returns my spirit bold.

I stand alone, unarmed,-yet not alone,
Who heeds no law but what within he finds,
Trusts his own vision, not to other minds,
He fights with thee- Father, aid thou thy son.